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THE WASHINGTON STAR (GREEN LINE)
27 May 1981

Press Access Halted To Analysts at CIA

Casey's Move Latest In Growing Secrecy

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After years of controversy within the CIA over how helpful the agency should be to journalists, Director William J. Casey has halted a practice of making agency analysts available on a selective basis to answer reporters' questions about non-secret subjects.

This tightening of the agency's information policy was decided upon March 27 but was not publicized. Queried about it yesterday, CIA spokesman Herbert Hetu said Casey felt that press briefings were an imposition on the analysts' time. Other sources said there were broader reasons of secrecy.

The decision came amid a general administration tightening of access to information relating to security and foreign affairs.

The National Security Council has become out of bounds to journalists. Both the State and Defense Departments are providing less information than they had in the past, with spokesmen rarely going beyond terse written material.

But the State Department still allows a fairly wide range of contacts between its officials and reporters, if somewhat less than in the last administration. At the Pentagon the large military public relations operation continues to arrange interviews on routine subjects not involving intelligence data.

Much of the information that journalists in Washington use in writing about security and foreign affairs comes from background briefings by government officials. People who are unwilling to be quoted by name as the source of published material often provide information that is attributed only to vaguely identified sources.

For about a quarter-century, the CIA has been among the infrequent providers of background information for American journalists. Foreigners were not welcome.

A reporter with questions about the Soviet economy or the North Korean political situation or the conflict in Chad could telephone the agency's unpublicized information office and ask for a briefing. Sometimes requests were turned down because a subject was too sensitive. Requests for information on a current crisis situation were usually denied on the grounds that CIA analysts were too busy.

But often an appointment was made for the journalist to drive out to Langley and talk with analysts — not the CIA's operations people or agents; just the analysts. Last year there were 125 such briefings. In 1975, when former Sen. Frank Church's committee investigations of the CIA sparked more interest, there were 247.

CIA people say there has always been some controversy within the agency about the practice.

Some officials felt that it was a worthwhile public service, a justifiable use of analysts' time and sometimes valuable as an exchange of material with well informed journalists. Others felt it was an imposition on analysts, that it could harm overseas operations, and that it hampered the CIA's exchange of intelligence with foreign agencies who worried about leaks here.

Asked for Casey's reasons for cutting off briefings, Hetu cited only the problem of imposing upon analysts' time. But other CIA officials said that was only part of the considerations, perhaps a minor part.

"A lot of our people never liked briefing the press," according to one official who declined to be identified. "They were always walking a thin line. They weren't supposed to use classified material, but to really make briefings on most subjects meaningful they had to get pretty close to it. It was uncomfortable."

Casey's decision reversed one taken by his predecessor, retired Adm. Stansfield Turner. When he became CIA director in the Carter administration, Turner decided to become more public about the agency's work. Hetu's office became more active.

One of Turner's orders was to make more CIA studies publicly available if that could be done without compromising secrecy. As a result, the sanitized or expurgated versions of an increasing number of classified studies have been circulated in recent years to Congress, the press, academic institutions and others.

Hetu said this publications policy was now under review.

National Security Council staff members have also been sources of background information for journalists for a number of years. But in the Reagan administration that has stopped.

Richard V. Allen, the council's head as President Reagan's security adviser, has given occasional background briefings on major topics of current interest. But, as part of the new administration's policy of playing down the NSC's role, he alone is supposed to talk to journalists.

The situation has become so sensitive that journalists now need escorts to go into the old Executive Office Building, where most NSC staff members have their offices.